

Lent 3B John2:13-22 Exodus 20:1-17 1 Cor. 1:18-25 Psalm 19

Jesus came to the Jerusalem temple, the center of meaning for his society, the hope of his people for the presence of God.

He scanned the scene all around and did not like what he saw:

a distorted system of insiders and outsiders,

a corrupt arrangement of social power,

exploitative economic practices,

faith being co-opted into commodity transactions.

And Jesus acted decisively against the distortion that he found.

He made a whip of cords, drove out the exploiters and scattered the coins of the traders.

This is not the action of someone who wants to tinker with things around the edges,

or make some minor modification in methods.

It is an act toward fundamental change, transformation, even trouble-making.

The story is familiar, even famous, and we just heard it.

We have distortions in our own society as well, where human things have been co-opted into aggressive, ambitious self-advancement.

What is the role of the church in the midst of the fracture and distortion we see and hear about daily?

Curiously, the Gospel lesson today has been matched with the ten commandments of Sinai in Exodus 20.

These commandments are not simple moral rules, even though they have been cheapened in today's culture wars.

They are God's abiding markers against all the distortions of life that come when the reality of God is displaced from the center of our existence.

When we depart from the commandments of God, we are sure to get a distorted life.

The summons of Sinai is that the people of God are to live a faithful life as an **alternative** to the distortions just described going on in the Jerusalem temple, and are found throughout our society today.

What would a faithful life look like for the church in the midst of a deeply distorted society?

Three themes within the Ten Commandments are especially pertinent.

The first three commands of Sinai are “no other gods,” “no images of God,” and “no use of God’s name in vain.”

Those three commandments together are a vision of a God who is beyond our usefulness, who cannot be recruited for our pet projects or reduced to our preferred notions, because this God is holy and beyond the manipulations of our ideological passions and convictions.

It is at least bad theology to say that to have an AK 15 is a God given right, as we lately have heard.

At the center of the Decalogue is ‘the command on Sabbath.’

Sabbath means that our time is not our own despite our 24/7 efforts to get ahead. They were doing that at the Jerusalem temple; busy, aggressive, reducing life to buying and selling.

Life does not consist of production and consumption.

And the commandments end with, “Thou shall not covet.”

This is not about minor acts of envy. It refers to big economic commitments based on the conviction that there is no limit to

what one can and ought to accumulate, expanding the space
between the haves and the have-nots.

Moses says, “Do not covet.” Do not reduce your life to an economic
rat race. And Jesus makes the same protest.

So, let’s bring these three themes of the Commandments into the
temple with Jesus.

In the temple, Jesus saw violations of all three commands that led
to distortion.

God was being used to support a manipulative system that
distorted worship: Moses said, “Do not take God’s name in vain.”

Life was being reduced to production and consumption, and
work to the management of commodity: Moses said, “Rest on the
seventh day.”

The compulsive drive for more and more was evident at the
expense of the neighbor: Moses said, “Thou shall not covet.”

It does not take any great imagination for us to see the same issues
now as he saw in the Jerusalem temple.

Religious traditions are cheapened as God is used in the culture wars.

Incessant productivity and consumption consume us, leaving us in a state of endless restlessness.

Coveting is rife in many systems and policies that enhance greed at great cost to the social fabric, without regard for the common good.

The commands were given by God to God's people Israel and remain as powerful testimony for the faithful, the Church.

Exploitation cannot be the way to manage life.

Life does not need to be sustained by our 24/7 anxiety.

God's people are called to live **alternatively** as testimony to what an undistorted life of trust might look like.

These commands were not for everyone, they were for Israel. And now they are for the community of the faithful that intends to live life according to the purposes of God.

Can we imagine that God has called us as a people to live by the commandments as an **alternative** to the distortion of the human arrangements of our society and culture?

Can we imagine that Jesus called his disciples to organize their life **differently**?

Can we imagine that Jesus has called his church to be a people with a special mission, the mission of **subverting the dominant distortion** of our social reality, so that the neighborhood might be reconstituted among us?

What an enormous call, to work as an **alternative** to a social arrangements and system gone crazy!

It is an incredibly **upstream** vocation, to live a **different** kind of life in order that the world may come to know that the pathologies in which we get caught are not the truth of our life.

But the church has always been under the call to live differently! Paul writes in our epistle lesson to the congregation living in the extravagant, undisciplined city of Corinth; 'Consider your call!'

You are not just anybody; you have been claimed, named, commissioned, addressed in your baptism!

You are called to the extravagant goodness of God, called to remember that you are God's. You belong to God and exist for God.

But Paul goes on to say, 'don't get puffed up about that, as if you were overqualified. Remember that you do not have noble bloodlines.'

"Not many of you," he writes, "are powerful." You are not deeply valued by the powerful of the world.

The call is to **ordinary people** who live ordinary lives.

But our ordinariness is **overcome** by shamelessly being seen in public with Jesus.

Paul suggests: think not of your qualifications, rather, remember how Jesus blew through the authorities in his own time, and then Paul proceeds to identify the key marks of the truth of Jesus.

Jesus was not wise by worldly standards: no academic credential or title or access to important people.

And he did dumb things: touched lepers and risked ritual contamination, ate supper with bad people, spent time with children, and violated the rules of his society.

He criticized the established powers of his time with great risk to himself. Risky, dangerous, unacceptable acts were Jesus' normal behavior.

Jesus was not strong by world standards:

He possessed no weapons or leverage or social connections or money or influence.

He was a contrast to the tax collectors, learned professors, big Roman governors and the big priests who wore elegant robes.

No property, nothing to leverage.

But Jesus exposed the powers of his age as useless power, having no power to save, no power to heal, no power to make safe, no power to make one happy.

He went his seemingly weak way and called others to his way of vulnerability.

Jesus was not wealthy by worldly standards:

No endowment or portfolio or credit, no capacity to lobby and bribe politicians to impact public opinion.

He lived off the land, noticing that birds and lilies are mostly unemployed.

would never hunger again.

Paul will write later to the Corinthians:

For you know that generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich. (2 Cor. 8:9)

Now isn't that amazing! By his poverty we may become rich! Not rich in money but rich in humanity, wealthy in human dignity, abundant in joy, overflowing in gratitude, free of the anxiety that goes with having too much.

Paul is writing to the church in Corinth as a Jew who had soaked in the commandments and had met Jesus on the road to Damascus.

He understood if you are too wise you might break the first commandment and try to harness God your own self-serving project.

He realized if you are too strong, you might violate the Sabbath and use your strength to control everything, if you are too rich, you might spend your life coveting, because you do not yet have enough.

We are living amidst the distorting, exploitative and dehumanizing social, economic and political systems of our day; those

that remain mute in the face of 17 school deaths,
that perpetuate great economic disparities,
that increase military budgets and reduce social safety nets,
that mistake bluster and privilege for strength,
that fail those with mental challenges but not the sport fans.

Paul writes that among such system powers, God's purposes are not accomplished by our wisdom, our power, by our wealth, but by a foolishness open to receive new life, a weakness that lets God's new life surge through us, a poverty that knows God will give what we need.

Do you think we can imagine that kind of church? A Church that has considered its call, and is seeking to live a life worthy of that calling to God's purposes, and not according to the distorted ambitions of our society?

When we live that way, we expose the way the world is organized, and we expose the way of the world and rob it of its authority.

I doubt we will make a whip of cords and drive the distorters out.

But people who depart the life of distortion find themselves
floating in well being,
going back into the neighborhood in generosity,
to city hall with courage, and living a true existence in
response to the faithful gift of God.